Spinoza's Stone: The Logic of *Donnie Darko*

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Further conceive, I beg, that a stone, while continuing in motion, should be capable of thinking and knowing, that it is endeavoring, as far as it can, to continue to move. Such a stone, being conscious merely of its own endeavor and not at all indifferent, would believe itself to be completely free, and would think that it continued in motion solely because of its own wish. This is that human freedom, which all boast that they possess, and which consists solely in the fact, that men are conscious of their own desire, but are ignorant of the causes whereby that desire has been determined.
- Spinoza, Letter to G.H. Schaller (October 1674)

The critical discussion of Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (2001) tends, naturally enough, to revolve around its conclusion. Plagued by apocalyptic visions of a giant rabbit named Frank, Donnie travels back in time in order to die, and thus undo the terrible events that occur in the film. The consensus among critics is that Donnie's death is a necessary and forceful *dénouement*, one that ties together the narrative into a tragic and yet morally satisfying finale. Annie Frisbie, for example, writes: "Donnie is back in his bed on the night of his death. He laughs. He should laugh: he has time traveled, and now he will die—but Gretchen won't be murdered. His family will weep but the world won't come to an end at the close of twenty-eight days. He's sacrificed himself to prove that God exists, that God is indeed sovereign over everything—and if God exists then no one dies alone, it is safe to die, and the world doesn't have to come to an end. His death does change the future, profoundly, but he laughs because he's learned that death isn't the worst thing that can happen to a person, not by half". Elvis Mitchell's less sympathetic assessment of the film is equally rooted in a view of Donnie as "a martyred teenager, a sacrificial victim of his own empathy". While more tentative in tone, Jason Cowley also adheres to this interpretation: "Donnie, in a moment of revelation and mutuality, gives his life to save not only the girl he loves but, it seems, the world itself. That, at least, is my interpretation of the final third of a film which resists all interpretation" (14). The goal of this paper is to offer a different reading of *Donnie Darko*, one that challenges the prevalent moral interpretation of Donnie's death as an act of "poetic justice".

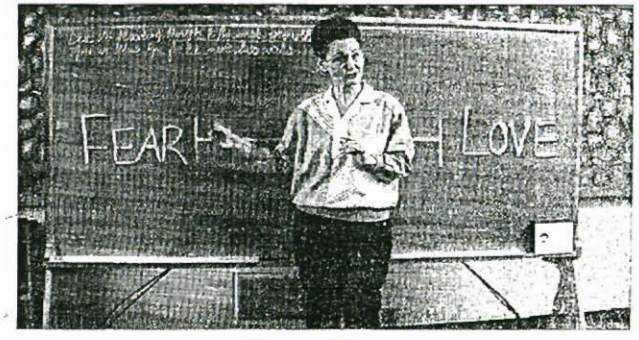
The film's thematic concerns with the nature of uncertainty are reflected in the way it blends different cinematic genres. *Donnie Darko* transitions seamlessly from a surface realism to surreal dream sequences to science fiction without settling firmly on any one style. Playing with time and history, furthermore, the film is firmly embedded in 1980s culture, a context it manipulates in order to blend the warm nostalgia of popular culture with biting reminders of the conservative ideology that existed alongside it.

> **Elizabeth**: I'm voting for Dukakis.
> **Eddie**: Hmm, well. Maybe when you have children of your own and they need braces, and you can't afford them because half of your husband's pay check goes to the federal government, you will regret that decision.
> **Elizabeth**: My husband's pay check? Anyway, I'm not going to squeeze one out till I'm, like, 30.
> [. . .]
> **Rose**: Do you honestly think Michael Dukakis will provide for this country till you're ready to squeeze one out?
> **Elizabeth**: Yeah, I do.[1]

This evocation of Dukakis's doomed campaign begins the film's general critique of the way humanity attempts to overcode historical events with a morality of "choice". In the face of an uncertain future, humanity has developed a strategic outlook that reduces the openness of the future to a false set of morally bound alternatives. This attitude manifests itself in the political realm, in this opening example, as a distinction between left and right, an attitude that reduces the complexity of political discourse to a simplified binary opposition. The film contrasts this simplistic logic to the complexity of life itself, shifting the debate from the particulars (Dukakis versus Bush) to a more general critique of how humanity views the world.

The debate over Dukakis thus transitions thematically into the amusing but poignant confrontation between Donnie and his teacher, Ms Farmer. Introducing pop psychologist Jim Cunningham's philosophy to the class, Farmer explains: "As you can see, the Life Line is divided into two polar extremes. Fear and love. Fear is in the negative energy spectrum. And love is in the positive energy spectrum". Just as the realm of politics has been polarized into an opposition between left and right, this scene shows how an antagonistic way of thinking has permeated all levels of contemporary culture. This binary mode has become the basic model of power within the modern institutional framework. Even Cherita, the school outcast, is rewarded for submitting to its precepts. The film thus sets up a recurring clash between this moral tunnel vision and those who seek to challenge its hegemony by insisting on the complexity of life. When asked to contribute to the "discussion" of fear and love, therefore, Donnie refuses to adhere to Cunningham's restrictive parameters.

> **Donnie**: Ling Ling finds a wallet on the ground filled with money. She takes the wallet to the address on the driver's license but keeps the money inside the wallet. I-I'm sorry Ms. Farmer. I don't get this.
> **Farmer**: Just place an X on the Life Line in the appropriate place.
> **Donnie**: No, I mean I know what to do, I just don't get this. You can't just



Fear and Love.

lump things into two categories. Things aren't that simple.

Farmer: The Life Line is divided that way.

Donnie: Life isn't that simple. I mean who cares if Ling Ling returns the wallet and keeps the money? It has nothing to do with either fear or love.

Farmer: Fear and love are the deepest of human emotions.

Donnie: Okay. But you're not listening to me. There are other things that need to be taken into account. Like the whole spectrum of human emotion. You can't just lump everything into these two categories and then just deny everything else.

Farmer: If you don't complete the assignment you'll get a zero for the day.

The sympathetic characters in the film face the continual necessity of breaking down these oppositions in order to establish a position of authenticity. For Donnie this necessity has become a reflex, a critical instinct that he exercises in every part of his life. "Donnie's madness," Amy Taubin argues, "[. . .] can be viewed as hypersensitivity to the institutionalized violence that putatively sane people take for granted". Even his deconstruction of the sexual life of Smurfs comes as a slap in the face to his friends' coarse logic: "First of all, Papa Smurf didn't create Smurfette. Gargamel did. She was sent in as Gargamel's evil spy with the intention of destroying the Smurf village. But the overwhelming goodness of the Smurf way of life transformed her. And as for the whole gang-bang scenario, it just couldn't happen. Smurfs are asexual. They don't even have reproductive organs under those little white pants. That's what's so illogical, you know, about being a Smurf". This challenge to the hegemony of moral choice is surely the centerpiece of *Donnie Darko*, and yet this critique has been repeatedly misunderstood in the overall interpretation of the film. The prevalent explanation of the ending follows Cunningham's flawed logic, as though the film were asking the viewer to decide: does Donnie die out fear or love?

The film's criticism of the philosophy of moral choice, of the necessity of breaking life's complexity into a set of simple oppositions, provides the starting point for a new interpretation. Within this critique there is a qualified rejection of the notion of free will, for the rhetorical function of free will is to award sovereignty to the individual, who must then use their freedom to create the conditions for happiness. This is the basic currency of Cunningham's philosophy: fear imprisons the will, and it is his task to "liberate" people from that fear. The film, by contrast, implies that the binary opposition between free will and determinism is a philosophical sleight of hand, a way of hiding moral manipulation while paying lip service to freedom. The free will championed by people like Cunningham is a veiled technique for generating guilt and shifting moral responsibility onto the individual: if you're not happy, it's your fault, you haven't used your free will to its proper potential.

The film explores these ideas, for instance, in the exchanges between Donnie and his science teacher, Dr Monnitoff. On two separate occasions, they discuss the possibility of time travel and how it might change the notion of destiny. The second time, Donnie is armed with two pieces of knowledge: the philosophy of time travel formulated by the eccentric former teacher Roberta Sparrow, and his recent visions of "destiny lines"—holographic trails that appear to predict the future path of an object.

Monnitoff: Well each vessel travels along a vector though space-time, along its centre of gravity.

Donnie: Like a spear?

Monnitoff: I beg your pardon?

Donnie: Like a spear that comes out of your chest.

Monnitoff: Umm . . . sure. And in order for the vessel to travel through time it's got to find a portal, or in this case a wormhole.

Destiny Lines.

Donnie: Well could these portals . . . could these portals just appear anywhere, anytime?

Monnitoff: I think that's highly unlikely. No, I think what you're talking about is umm . . . an act of God.

God exists, in this scenario, to guarantee the epistemological and moral order of things. God has become the prop, the "sufficient reason," to use the language of philosophy, that holds together the human conception of how the world works.[2] Yet throughout the film Donnie is confronted by actions and events that seem to be radically detached from any identifiable cause: the falling airplane part, the sleepwalking episodes, his encounters with Frank. In all of these instances, the film plays with the expectations of his viewers who, trained to think within the logic of the sufficient cause, are lured into constructing a unified explanation in order to explain these bizarre events.

Monnitoff provides a compelling critique of the opposition between free will and determinism. Having observed the existence of the destiny lines, Donnie argues that "if God controls time, then all time is pre-decided. [. . .] Every living thing follows along a set path. And if you could see your path or channel, then you could see into the future, right? Like . . . that's a form of time travel". Monnitoff immediately sees a flaw in Donnie's theory: "Well, you're contradicting yourself Donnie. If we were able to see our destinies manifest themselves visually, then we would be given a choice to betray our chosen destinies. And the mere fact that this choice exists would make all preformed destiny come to an end". If we know what our destiny is, argues Monnitoff, should it not be possible to subvert it? This question undermines the assumptions of modern thought by throwing the variable of knowledge into the equation of free will. It is not possible, in other words, to describe our actions as truly free if we do not fully understand their significance. Monnitoff's observation shows the erroneous assumptions forced on us by the logic of sufficient reason, for humanity's belief in a rationally structured world means that it will frequently latch onto even the most superficial and improbable explanations in the absence of a visible cause. Knowledge, to quote a famous French proverb, breeds understanding: the more you know, the more you understand the contingent forces that surround an event, the greater the morally gray areas of an event appear to be. Those who ponder a situation deeply can thus appear to be morally "soft" in the eyes of the ethically myopic. This institutionalized myopia is the "prescribed nonsense" against which Donnie's English teacher, Ms Pommeroy, protests so vehemently. The children are being trained into a state of moral inertia as a result of this logic. Certainly this is a moral message—in the DVD commentary, Kelly describes it as "moral anarchy"—but it is one that in turn reveals the fundamentally *immoral* nature of values that are based on ingrained myopia and prescribed ignorance. The film provides some excruciating examples of the extent to which the ability to judge without reflection

has become a substitute for genuine critical thought, steering people away from profound analysis into programmed obedience.

The usefulness of such blind judgment to the entrenched power structure is reinforced by the film's allusions to Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice in Wonderland* (1865). The obvious connection is the rabbit motif, from Frank's Halloween costume, to the rabbit ears in the Sparkle Motion dance, to the choice of music in Echo and the Bunnymen—all add up to an unmistakable allusion to Alice's fantastic pursuit of the white rabbit.[3] The thematic importance of Carroll's seminal work lies in its subversion of logic, in the way it pushes conventional wisdom to the limits of preposterousness. While the film draws in many ways from Carroll's text, special attention should be given to the final chapter of the novel in which Alice is put on trial. Carroll writes:

> "Let the jury consider their verdict," the King said, for about the twentieth time that day.
> "No, no!" said the Queen. "Sentence first – verdict afterwards."
> "Stuff and nonsense!" said Alice loudly. "The idea of having the sentence first!"
> [. . .]
> "Off with her head!" the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved.
> "Who cares for you?" said Alice (she had grown to be full size by this time). "You're nothing but a pack of cards". (126)

This logical reversal—morality first, explanation later—provides the template for the manner in which Principal Cole dismisses Ms Pomeroy:

> **Principal**: I'm sorry, Karen, but we don't think the methods you've undertaken here are appropriate.
> **Pomeroy**: With all due respect, sir, what exactly about my methods do you find inappropriate?
> **Principal**: I don't have time to get into a debate about this Karen. I believe I've made myself clear.
> **Pomeroy**: You call this clarity? I don't think that you have a clue what it's like to communicate with these kids. And we are losing them to apathy . . . to this prescribed nonsense. They are slipping away.

The parallel between this scene and Alice's trial is unmistakable. Like Alice, Pomeroy sees through the system of "prescribed nonsense," this logic that, when examined critically, falls apart like a house of cards. In contrast to Pomeroy's "failure," the success of people like Cunningham lies in their ability to take advantage of such conditioning. Cunningham trains his victims how *not* to look, to accept the surface of things as their real nature. Refusing to see the problems in the world places them out of sight and out of mind. Cunningham thus trades anxiety for ignorance: what you don't know can't hurt you. The film masterfully unmasks the consequences of such ignorance for a community trained into bovine submission. Donnie's actions reveal the horrors of Cunningham's taste for child pornography, for instance, but

The sexualization of the dancers in Sparkle Motion.

the film also subtly points to the moral blindness of the general public in this matter by intercutting images of Cunningham's burning house with shots of the sexualized dancers in Sparkle Motion. While Cunningham is certainly guilty, the film implies, there is a broader, communal guilt at work. By allowing the latent sexualization of their children, society has effectively fostered the desires of predators like Cunningham—a guilt that the community as a whole will continue to deny even after (or especially because) of his downfall.[4]

To what extent, then, does Donnie possess knowledge of his actions and their consequences? The spirit of tragedy is contained in this question—think of Oedipus, whose normally deplorable acts of sleeping with his mother and killing his father are softened, in the eyes of the audience, by his lack of knowledge. Innocence is defined not only by one's actions, after all, but also by the level of one's knowledge.[5] Oedipus was not stupid—he demonstrated his intelligence by defeating the Sphinx—but he was foolish enough to trust his intellect to carry him through the contingencies of life unscathed. His optimism and *hubris* are rewarded with disaster, but this savage "justice" is based entirely on contingency. As Gretchen observes so poignantly, "I guess some people are just born with tragedy in their blood". Yet in speaking these lines she is pitying herself, not Donnie: little does she know.

But Gretchen is indeed meant for tragedy, since the film uses her name as an intertextual bridge to the famous dilemma of Faust. Like Donnie, Faust has two possible destinies: in Marlowe's version, Faust's pact with the devil ends with the hero being dragged into hell and torn to pieces by demons, whereas in Goethe's version, Faust is saved by the mediation of Gretchen's enduring love for him. These two very different interpretations of the Faust story are connected back to key myths about the origins of morality. Marlowe's play derives its central themes from the biblical story of the Fall, in which humanity's disobedience is punished by eternal damnation. Goethe's retelling, however, provides a more complicated conclusion that stems from a recurring struggle in the text between Christian and classical (pagan) values. Both paradigms begin with an act that demonstrates the *hubris* of humanity in its pursuit of knowledge, but there is a strong difference in the *moral* interpretation assigned to these acts. The fall of Adam and Eve is a sign of their weakness, an idea reinforced when they show themselves to be unworthy of their newly acquired knowledge. Prometheus, by contrast, proves his heroism by crossing the boundary separating humanity from the divine to steal fire from the gods. Prometheus is punished for his strength rather than his weakness: his worth is demonstrated by his willingness to risk eternal torment in order to achieve his aims. The moral position of the gods, fittingly enough, reflects these differing perspectives: the Christian God is just in meting out his punishment on his unworthy creations, whereas the torture inflicted on Prometheus is cruel and tyrannical. In making his pact, Goethe's Faust is torn between these two worldviews, and the conflict between them becomes the central thematic drive of the narrative. Despite the Christian overtones of Goethe's ending, the drama nonetheless ends on a deliberately ambiguous note. Goethe fuses together the two perspectives, concluding that Faust's search for knowledge is heroic (classical) and thus he is worthy of being redeemed by a deity who guarantees justice in the world (Christian). *Donnie Darko* provides a new and different twist on the Faust story. That the film is responding to Goethe's version of *Faust* (1808-32) is established by Gretchen's name: in Goethe's text, Gretchen is Faust's lover. Like her namesake in the film, Goethe's Gretchen dies tragically at the end of Part One, but returns at the end of Part Two to conduct Faust into heaven.[6] *Donnie Darko* thus resembles Goethe's text in its two-part structure, moving as it does from the initial scenario (in which Donnie lives) to the revised version (in which he dies). Further-

more, the choice of Halloween as the culmination of the narrative parallels Goethe's use of Walpurgis Night as the setting for Faust's judgment. But for all its ambiguities, Goethe's *Faust* is forced into making a choice, into assigning Faust a definable destiny that ends up reinforcing the idea of a just and moral world.

The problem that *Donnie Darko* must surmount, therefore, is how to overcome the problem of choice and the moral judgment that inevitably accompanies it. One solution is suggested by Donnie and Gretchen's trip to the cinema, a sequence in which the film references Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Scorsese's film sets out to imagine what would have happened if Christ had succumbed to an invitation from the devil to come down from the cross. The film is revolutionary in the way it rethinks its source material, for although Christ's failure to die causes many changes (Christ renounces his mission, marries Mary Magdalene, and grows to be an old man), these events do not hinder the historical spread of Christianity. So while Scorsese, like Goethe, returns to the "authorized" version at the end of the film, the seed of doubt has been planted in the viewer's mind—what does it matter whether Christ died or not? As long as we *believe* in his death with the blind logic demonstrated by St Paul, then the future of Christianity is assured. So too we are meant to ask of Donnie's fate—what does it matter whether he lives or dies? Does his death really prove that we live in a just world?

The last temptation of Donnie.

Building on these literary and cinematic references, the film constructs a reality in which alternative endings and parallel universes, each expressing a different set of possibilities, can coexist. These ideas are not mere fictional speculation, but are based on recurring ideas in both philosophy and science. As far back as the early eighteenth century, the philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz put forward the idea of multiple worlds and possibilities. In his book *Theodicy* (1710) Leibniz argues that since God, as the prime mover of the universe, possesses a wisdom derived from a position of omniscience, everything that happens in the world is both necessary and just. This justice extends even to those occurrences that seem, from the limited perspective of humanity, to be unjust. With God in charge, the world in which we live is both rationally organized (since God is the ultimate source of wisdom) and ethically necessary (since God cannot commit an error)—our world, to use the famous phrase, is the best of all possible worlds. Whatever their shortcomings, Leibniz's thoughts about alternative worlds have become an important part not only of how philosophy sees the world, but also science.[7] The revolution in twentieth-century science—particularly quantum physics—has caused scientists to reconsider seriously the idea of multiple worlds.[8] In his book *The Elegant Universe* (2000), for instance, Brian Greene describes what has become known as the "multiverse" theory:

> Imagine that what we call *the* universe is actually only one tiny part of a vastly larger cosmological expanse, one of an enormous number of island universes scattered across a grand cosmological archipelago. [. . .] Linde has found that the brief but crucial burst of inflationary expansion [. . .] may not have been a unique, one-time event. Instead, he argues, the conditions for inflationary expansion may happen repeatedly in isolated regions peppered throughout the cosmos, which then undergo their own inflationary ballooning in size, evolving into new, separate universes. And in each of these universes, the process continues, with new universes sprouting from far-flung regions in the old, generating a never-ending web of ballooning cosmic expanses. (366-7)

One of the most famous examples used to demonstrate this theory is provided by Erwin Schrödinger. In 1935, Schrödinger proposed a thought experiment in which an imaginary cat was placed inside a box along with a vial of poison gas. A particle gun with a fifty percent chance of firing was then aimed at a mechanism which, if it detected a particle, would break the vial and thus kill the cat. Schrödinger argued that while the box remained unopened, the reality *inside* the box after the gun had been fired had split in two. Only by opening the box could it be determined which scenario had occurred—until then, the cat was simultaneously dead and alive, since both possibilities remained equally possible.

The film also provides subtle allusions to various other scientific principles. For instance, important clues are given in three early shots, all of which occur more or less in sequence while Donnie is riding home. In the first shot, Donnie is passed on his bicycle by a red car. This car appears to be the vehicle driven by Frank on Halloween eve. The second shot occurs just before Donnie pulls up to the house, and shows Eddie Darko standing in the front yard blowing leaves. The third scene, immediately after Donnie arrives home, is a shot of Samantha jumping on the trampoline. In all of these scenes, the film, by showing an action coupled with a reaction, is making an implicit visual reference to Newton's Third Law of Motion.[9] Modern science, however, has since added an important caveat to Newton's principle: the phenomenon of entropy. Whenever an action occurs there is a transfer of energy, but this transfer is not nearly as simple or perfect as Newton envisaged—in an exchange energy is inevitably "lost" by its dispersal into other, contingent things, which creates the possibility of accidental side effects. In the same way that Newtonian physics simplifies the interplay of action and reaction, so too the principle of sufficient reason, by focusing all its attention on what it determines to be the direct effect of an action, ends up overlooking its potential side effects. Every event, in other words, has an unpredictable ripple effect caused by entropy, a set of contingencies that can radically change the meaning of an action. "[E]very misstep eventually leads to an inviting and unexplored path," argues Mark Olsen in his analysis of the film, "and every mistake proves to be the only possible choice" (16). That is why the red car is so important: it is only *after* the fact that we construct it as important, that we incorporate it into the web of sufficient reason.

On the surface, therefore, the film's ending seems to boil down to a choice between two variants: whether Donnie lives or dies. But it would go against the grain of the film if Donnie's fate could be broken down into a simplistic set of alternatives. Jared Rapfogel agrees: "*Donnie Darko* would be impoverished if it tipped its hand in either direction—irrelevant and bloodless if it were to become pure science fiction; prosaic and pointless if the whole movie were explained away psychologically. [. . .] The excitement of a movie like *Donnie Darko* is that it can be interpreted in so many ways—where many filmmakers would be anxious to provide a key in the end, Kelly knows that by withholding a clear-cut final solution, he creates an infinitely richer film, one

that equals the sum total of all these possible interpretations". Nonetheless, the film anticipates the conclusion its audience has been trained to desire: a *dénouement* that not only seems to fit the moral dimensions of Donnie's heroic personality, but also ties all the pieces of the plot together, that gives it a sufficient reason. Like the other oppositions in the film, such as fear and love, the conclusion is left open to the extent that it should be regarded as a deliberate ruse. The film gives the audience the neatly packaged conclusion it wants—but only apparently so. Choosing one variant over the other imposes a moral meaning onto Donnie's death, in which his life is sacrificed heroically to save those he loves.

Frank's car in the opening scene.

But such a meaning is thrown into doubt when examined closely. For while Donnie's death seems, on the surface, to have only good repercussions, it also possesses negative consequences: the Darko family has to deal with Donnie's death, Gretchen never meets Donnie—and, most important of all, Cunningham's dungeon is never discovered.[10] This last factor is crucial, for without the intervention of Frank the child pornography ring would have remained unexposed. Thus the hollowness of the moral interpretation is exposed: it would require us to trade off the lives of Gretchen, Rose, Samantha, and Frank in exchange for Donnie's—*and* those of Cunningham's victims. The viewer is not meant to choose one variant over the other, but instead to accept their dual existence as variations on a theme. When the film returns us to the beginning of the narrative, what we are seeing is a different world, a different set of possibilities. These variants are unaware of each other, since the different paths taken by Donnie make them, in Leibniz's terms, incompossible. The film plays with the fact that, although the worlds are mutually exclusive, they are nonetheless connected in the mind of the viewer: this is the *only* way in which they are connected. *Donnie Darko* allows us an approximate glimpse into what Donnie calls "God's channel," in which all possible worlds and possibilities can be seen. "And so at his film's very end one character waves mournfully to another from across the street," writes Leslie Felperin. "The two people don't know each other at all at this point, and perhaps they never will because the character that connected them in another timeline has just died. The wave is a phantom of that other-time connection, one they feel numbly compelled to make" (34). The film emphasizes the limitations of humanity's temporal perspective by allowing its viewers little more than a glimpse of the second variation. Given our limited point of view, we would be foolish to play God and pass judgment on Donnie.

In this portrayal of alternative possibilities, the film follows the example modeled by Schrödinger. If we take both variants together, Donnie is both dead and alive, trapped inside a cinematic box that cannot be opened. Donnie's reality is thus eternally suspended between two versions, two possibilities, two worlds that can be neither clarified nor reconciled. It is not simply a matter of knowing or not knowing, for

there is a paradox ingrained into the very structure of reality that makes it impossible to know.[11] The film represents this paradox through various symbolic moments: Donnie's assurances to Cherita about the future, for example, fall on deaf ears when he grabs her ear muffs; the white noise on the television signifies nothing except the lack of a signal; the Darko family commits itself to a legal document according to which, in Donnie's sardonic précis, they are "not supposed to tell anyone what nobody knows". The film's genius lies in the way it anticipates the audience's response: herein lies the ruse, the sleight of hand that plays on the viewer's ingrained need for a sufficient reason. Far from bemoaning the injustice of life, *Donnie Darko* is a celebration of the Promethean qualities in humanity. There are no direct causes, only side-effects: reality is made up of contingencies that project us through our possible lives, and to think otherwise would leave us with the same sense of illusion experienced by Spinoza's stone.

Notes

[1]Kelly is no doubt also taking a cleverly concealed swipe at contemporary political rhetoric. Elizabeth is 18 in 1988, which means that in 2001, when *Donnie Darko* was released, she would be 30 or 31. Critics have picked up on this underlying political critique—Dennis Lim, for example, calls the film "an unsolvable Rubik's cube of Reaganite spectacle".

[2]"Sufficient reason" refers to the cause of something; traditional logic states that every effect must be the result of some cause.

[3]The deleted scenes on the DVD expand on this motif. In them, the Graham Greene book is banned, and is replaced by Richard Adams's *Watership Down* (1972), an apocalyptic allegory in which the central characters are rabbits. Of course, there are other clues pointing back to Carroll's work, such as Donnie's attempts to pass through the looking-glass into Frank's world. Also, in the extra material it is revealed that when Monnitoff dies, he leaves behind a daughter—Alice, aged 7.

[4]Ms Farmer's denial of the situation is entirely consistent when seen from this perspective, as echoed in Rose Darko's deliberately ambiguous utterance about Cunningham's "kiddy (Kitty) porn dungeon".

[5]The Latin root of the word "innocence" means "to be without knowledge" (the prefix "in," meaning "not" combined with the verb "agnoscere," which means "to know, to recognize").

[6]Like in Goethe's *Faust*, Gretchen's love for Donnie may be what "saves" him—not by changing the physical actions and events of the past, but in a purely spiritual sense.

[7]Voltaire launched a vicious critique of Leibniz's ideas in his novella *Candide* (1759). In one scene, while their friend Jacques the Anabaptist is drowning, the philosopher Dr Pangloss convinces Candide that he should not save him, arguing that "Lisbon harbor was made on purpose for this Anabaptist to drown there" (33). Once again, the principle of sufficient reason is shown to be a case of sentence before verdict—the characteristic logic of morality.

[8]A fact that the film emphasizes by referencing Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* (1988), the book that became a bestseller and a cultural icon when it was published in the late 1980s. Hawking's ideas, however, are the culmination of a series of breakthroughs in quantum physics that began with Einstein. Nonetheless, it is difficult to dismiss Hawking's influence on the film, and Philip Kerr even argues that he "provides the whole *raison d'être* for this teenage angst movie" (45).

[9]"For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."

[10]In the extra material on the DVD, it is revealed that there are further negative consequences from Donnie's death. While Cunningham shoots himself shortly after the film's ending, he destroys the evidence of the child porn dungeon in his home, and

thus the ring is never broken. His company, Cunning Visions, continues to flourish, generating millions of dollars and expanding into a global business. Dr Monnitoff also dies eleven years later in a mysterious car crash, leaving behind his wife (Ms Pomeroy) and their two children.

"The film plays with this paradox through different metaphors, the best example being the whiteboard on the fridge. The whiteboard constitutes a "palimpsest," a surface that can be erased and rewritten. The palimpsest has long been used a metaphor for how human memory works—see, for example, Freud's essay "A Note on the 'Mystic Writing Pad'" (1925). Kelly's implication is that film is also a palimpsest—and, by extension, so is reality itself.

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Class, Gender, and Genre in Zalman King's "Real High Erotica": The Conflicting Mandates of Female Fantasy

David Andrews

Locked inside all women was the same secret
place where fantasies are born.
—*Delta of Venus* (1995)

For two decades, Zalman King has been synonymous with an upscale form of sexploitation that is addressed to women. The first decade was King's influential period. Between the 1986 release of Adrian Lyne's lucrative *9 1/2 Weeks*, which King produced and co-wrote,[1] and the 1995 release of the Anaïs Nin adaptation *Delta of Venus*, which he directed, the filmmaker made a string of features with elegant production values often financed by Hollywood labels. Some of his efforts, like *Two Moon Junction* (1988) and *Wild Orchid* (1990), enjoyed limited theatrical release, while others, like *Red Shoe Diaries* (1990) and *Lake Consequence* (1992), first appeared on cable, with all of them doing well on video.[2] But King exerted his greatest influence via the cable serial. In 1992, the *Red Shoe Diaries* (*RSD*) feature spawned the eponymous Showtime series (1992-1999), which yielded sixty-seven half-hour featurettes, most of which have a softcore format. More than any other entity, *RSD* proved that a softcore program could deliver consistently high ratings (Bellafante 76, Backstein 308-10).

It is also true that more than any other individual King facilitated the emergence of contemporary softcore, a pornographic genre that has proliferated in non-theatrical niches since 1991. King's upscale models played a pivotal role in reversing sexploitation's decade-long association with teen sex comedies and other timid, downscale, masculinized cycles, opening a "respectable" path to greater explicitness—and to the use of a distinctly softcore, narrative-number structure. Such was not a distinction that King ever wanted or invoked. Indeed, he has rejected as "a bit humiliating" any account of himself as a softcore director or "an arty pornographer" (Epstein 3, Sibert 2). His directorial efforts thus tend to stop shy of a regular softcore format—which even holds true for most of the *RSD* episodes that he directed. His imi-

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